Beverly Cole, standing at White House switchboard, heads staff of 21. Her assistant, Mary Burns, seated, notes the pressures, but says, "It's never dull."

White House Phone Operators: Somewhere They'll Find You

by Connecticut Walker

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Beverly Cole always gets her man. For the last 30 years she has tracked down people for Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and now Nixon.

"If the President wants someone, and that person is living, we find him," she says. "There is no such word as 'no' in our vocabulary."

Beverly Cole, 55, barely 5 feet tall, compact and bespectacled, is the chief White House operator. She heads a staff of 19 women and 2 men, who—from their narrow sub-basement office in the bowels of the old Executive Office building—handle all the White House calls and callers.

The card file

Miss Cole and her staff pride themselves on their fast service. They have a card file dating back to Roosevelt's Administration with 10,000 names and numbers of current and former government officials, businessmen, journalists, and Presidential friends and associates. "We also read lots of newspapers and magazines to keep up to date on new appointments," says Miss Cole. "As soon as someone is even being considered for a major governmental job, we make a card out on him just to have his number on hand.

"By keeping our eye on the news," she continues, "we can sometimes make our work easier. We'll check the papers, for example, to find out if there's a big football game scheduled. We'll make note of the coach's name and where the game is being played. The President, you see, may want to speak with the coach after the game. He often does, and we're ready with his number."

When the President goes to San Clemente or Key Biscayne, he takes four or five operators with him. They serve as a crucial part of his communication staff.

Miss Cole, whose salary after 32 years of government service is now $15,000 plus, explains, "The President often wants to reach prominent people who have unlisted telephone numbers. Of course, we have all the facilities of the telephone company at our disposal. We also rely on the Congressional Directory. We use it so often that we call it our bible. We sometimes enlist the help of the state or local police or even the post office. If the President wants someone in a small town, we might call his neighbors and ask them to tack a note on his front door. We keep in touch with the secretaries of former Presidents, and they often supply us with a number we need.

'Initiative and ingenuity'

"Our job does require a certain amount of initiative and ingenuity," she continues.

"It's not always easy to track people down. We've contacted men on trains and told them to get off at the next

station to accept a White House call. We've notified airport managers and had them hold planes.

"Once during the Eisenhower Administration, I had to contact Clarence Randall [consultant on foreign economic policy]," she recalls. "He was out deep-sea fishing and couldn't be reached. I tried everything I could think of. Finally, in desperation, I had someone attach a note to a tree near his landing spot. Luckily, when he came ashore he saw the note fluttering in the breeze and called the White House."

Sometimes three operators will work on a single call. They will put out so many different feelers that they never know which finally succeeded. "We don't bother to retrace our steps but just go on to the next call," says Miss Cole, who has been doing just that since she left Montrose, Pa., in 1941, and came to work as an operator in the Treasury Department. After 18 months she moved over to the White House where she has been ever since.

They tend to stay

Although the starting annual salary is relatively low at $7198 and the hours often stretch into overtime and include weekends, White House operators rarely leave to take other jobs. Most of them come from positions at the CIA, Pentagon, or other government agencies. They are handpicked by Miss Cole, and once they join the White House staff, they tend to stay.

Miss Cole's assistant, Mrs. Mary Burns, 44, is another case in point. She has held her post for 25 years and served five administrations. "You have to be able to stand a lot of pressure to like this job," she says. "But it's never dull. We feel intimately involved with government, I guess because we talk directly with the President and his closest staff.

'A good friend'

"When a President goes out of office, you feel almost as though you've lost a good friend," she adds.

"One time during President Kennedy's term in office, I had a call for his valet. I rang the kitchen where he usually hung out, and the President himself answered the phone. I was very embarrassed and apologetic but President Kennedy couldn't have been nicer and more down to earth. 'Just a minute, please, operator,' he said. 'Hey, George, telephone call for you.' "

After many years on the job, White House operators develop a knack for recognizing voices and for knowing to whom the President will want to speak. "President Johnson just loved Jack Valenti's 2-year-old daughter," recalls Miss Cole.

"When she would call him up, we always knew to put her right through. If the President was busy on another line, he'd call her back as soon as he finished."

LBJ calling

The White House operators concur that President Johnson used the telephone more than any other chief executive. "He was on the phone from 8 a.m. until midnight almost every day," remarks Miss Cole. "When he left office, he gave me a photograph of Lynda Bird seated at our console set."

The switchboard staff are as expert at deflecting crank calls as they are at fielding legitimate ones. "The Protective Intelligence Division deals with threatening calls," explains Miss Cole, "and we have an immediate connection with them. Most of the odd calls we get come from kooks and jokers. We handle these ourselves.

"Someone called the other night, for example, and said she was Mrs. Kissinger. I know there's no Mrs. Kissinger, except the Secretary of State's mother, and it wasn't her. I told this woman that she was misrepresenting herself and committing a federal offense.

She hung up, and then called back to apologize. 'I was only joking,' she said 'please erase all recordings of my call.' Well, I hadn't made any records of her call at all. Gosh, how nutty people can be."

Is it legitimate?

In order to ensure that they are not fooled by impersonators, the White House operators check out most Presidential callers. "If someone like Senator Goldwater calls for the President, we take down his number," says Miss Cole. "We then check it with our files, if it matches, we know the call is legitimate and we ring them back. If the Senator calls from a friend's house and we don't have that number, we might ring his secretary. She'll confirm that he's out of town, and then we go ahead and put through the call."

Like telephone operators everywhere the White House team makes the usual morning wake-up calls; they will occasionally make hotel reservations or send a car to the airport for a V.I.P.

"Years ago, when the White House staff was smaller," says Miss Cole, "we'd do more odds and ends. But now we discourage officials here from thinking that we're one of their secretaries. We have enough to do during working hours. After all, we try to be more than just your average operator."